

Unpacked: The collections of the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg

An exhibition and more

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Abstract

The Friedrich Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg (FAU), Germany, holds about 17 scientific collections. Some of them have been established only recently, others date back to the very foundation of the university in 1743 or even have their roots in the Kunst- und Wunderkammern of the Margraves of Ansbach and Bayreuth. The collections differ not only with regard to their history, but also concerning their size, accessibility and presentation and the extent to which they are utilised for academic teaching and research.

In spite of these differences, the collections show common characteristics as well: First, they all contain three-dimensional objects which have an immense potential for the communication of science and for the representation of the university to the public. Second, the objects are all subject to fairly similar problems regarding the basic museological tasks of collecting, preserving, researching on and presenting them.

Given these shared needs and opportunities, the curators of the collections organised themselves into a working group about three years ago. As a first step, information material (leaflet, set of postcards) was published and an information platform (www.sammlungen.uni-erlangen.de) was established. In the summer term 2007, with the support of the university's administration, the working group mounted a campaign to inform the general public about the widely unknown treasures of the university's collections. This campaign used different ways and means to achieve its aim.

This paper presents the central event of this campaign, the exhibition "Unpacked: The collections of the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg". The project faced the problem of putting 17 collections on the scene without creating an "omnium gatherum". The paper focuses, therefore, on the concept of the exhibition. And it poses the final question "What to do next?" One answer could be the formation of a nationwide "task force on university collections" for the discussion of common problems and possible solutions.



Fig. 1 - Poster of the exhibition. Photo G. Pöhlein; Design P. Hörndl

Introduction

The situation at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg is in many respects similar to the situation in Vienna and Edinburgh. It is a university with collections, but without a university museum. The re-discovery of the university's collections started about three years ago with the formation of a working group of the collections' curators. I want to stress this point: In Erlangen the movement was started by the curators themselves, not imposed by university authorities.

Our latest - and up to now by far largest - joint project was the exhibition *Unpacked: The collections of the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg* (Ausgepackt. Die Sammlungen der Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg), realised in collaboration with the museum of the City of Erlangen from 20th May to 29th July, 2007 (Fig. 1).

This paper covers three points: the first and main part explains the concept of the exhibition; it then gives a short overview on the collections themselves and finally, casts a glance on our visions for the future.

Concept of the exhibition

The concept was elaborated by Udo Andraschke and Marion M. Ruisinger (FAU) together with Thomas Engelhardt (Stadtmuseum Erlangen) in close collaboration with the representatives of the 17 university collections. Financial support was granted by the university in August 2006. We thus had a

time frame of nine months to realise the exhibition. As the university itself has neither exhibition rooms nor qualified staff at its disposal, the collaboration with the municipal museum turned out to be extremely helpful (Fig. 2).

We decided to tell our story in three chapters: "Collecting", "The Collections" and "Collected Things" (ANDRASCHKE, ENGELHARDT & RUISINGER 2008). For the structure, main texts, and selected views from the exhibition, see also the comprehensive online-presentation.¹

The first chapter presented the historical phenomena of collecting from a general and a local perspective (Fig. 3). First, we introduced our visitors into the historic relationship between collecting and science by using enlarged reproductions of copper plates showing Early Modern collections. Then we focused on Erlangen University's early history of collecting.

This history is closely linked to private collectors and in particular to the founder of the university, Margrave Friedrich of Brandenburg-Bayreuth. In the early 19th



Fig. 2 – Museum of the City of Erlangen (Stadtmuseum).
Photo G. Pöhlein

¹ www.ausgepackt.uni-erlangen.de

century, the university's collections were systematically ordered and for some decades publicly shown in an *Academic Museum*. Later on, when buildings were erected for anatomy, botany, zoology etc, the collections were transferred into the respective institutes and the museum was closed.



Fig. 3 - The chapter *Collecting and Science* in the entrance hall. Photo G. Pöhlein

the abundance of the university's collections, of the variety of questions still to be answered and of the general and continuing importance of the material basis of science. It was the very same idea underlying an exhibition entitled *Storage* at the University of Porto.

In the next room, the city council's former assembly hall, visitors were presented the reduced



Fig. 4 - The *Depot*. Photo G. Pöhlein

The second chapter of the exhibition, *The Collections*, was dedicated to the systematic presentation of the 17 university collections. First, the visitor entered a room which formed the very heart of the exhibition: the *Depot*, a virtual storeroom for the university's collections (Fig. 4). On its walls were shelved a great variety of objects representing a modern *Kunst- und Wunderkammer*. Here, the visitor received an impression of

aesthetics of the *Parcours*. Here, each of the 17 collections was represented by a standard module including a text, a photo and a show-case with objects (Fig. 5). The 17 modules were placed along the walls in chronological order. The centre of the room was used for interactive stations. A favourite with our visitors was the *Commodore 64* with the computer game *Ms. Pac-Man* (Fig. 6)

The third and last chapter was dedicated to the leading actors of the collections: the things themselves. In a suite of six small rooms we presented nine selected objects from nine different collections. These nine items were surrounded by secondary objects, pictures and texts which revealed the historical context of the central object (Fig. 7). Thus, the things started talking, and they told unexpected stories:

An oil painting from the university's library led to a bladder stone; a passenger pigeon was linked to a children's theatre in Frankfurt and to Rio Reiser, a German rock star; and the historic school bench referred not only to the children who occupied it in former times, but also to the senior citizens who occupy it today in the biographic therapy programme launched by the Collection of School History - an approach quite similar to the *1940's room* at the University College London.

The exhibition ended with a single object – the neglected specimen of a human heart - in an arched showcase carrying the title *zu spät / too late*". This was our memorial to the forgotten, lost and destroyed collections. And it was the final appeal to our visitors - and to the responsible people at the university - to care for the collections, which form an important part of our cultural heritage and of our specific academic identity. To arouse this sense of responsibility in the Erlangen public as well as within the university staff was the main intention of our exhibition.

To achieve this aim, we complemented the exhibition with additional projects. There were



Fig. 5 - The *Parcours* through the 17 collections. Photo G. Pöhlein

advertisements, e.g. on the railway information leaflets on trains from Munich via Berlin to Hamburg, the publication *Die Sammlungen der Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg* (ANDRASCHKE & RUISINGER 2007), a lecture programme, an internet presentation, an educational programme developed by the museum's professional staff and a press campaign with weekly essays in the local newspaper.

This exhibition project will hopefully serve as a starting point for future activities for and with the collections.

The collections

When Erlangen University was founded in 1743, three collections came into existence as well: The anatomical collection, the library and the archive.

Margrave Friedrich left his natural history cabinet, which had been housed in the palace in Bayreuth, to the University of Erlangen. This was the foundation for the botanical, geological, and zoological collections, which were separated in the early 19th century.

In the course of the 19th century, the first special collections came into existence: The Martius Collection of pharmacognosy, the collection of pathological anatomy, the collection of antique plaster casts, and the observatory in Bamberg with its astronomical instruments.

In the 20th century, private collectors gave the main impulses for the establishment of collections of ethnography, prehistory, and musical instruments. The newly founded dermatological clinic was

enriched by a moulages collection. The three youngest collections were assembled by members of the schools of education, medicine and computer science.



Fig. 6 - A favorite not only with our younger visitors: the Commodore 64 with Ms. Pac-Man. Photo G. Pöhlein

Today, the 17 collections differ widely with respect to their size, storage and presentation. Some are very well presented and accessible for the public during fixed opening hours, others are stored away and hardly known by the scientific staff itself. They differ also with respect to their inclusion into the research and teaching programmes of their mother institutions: some form an important, integral part for the students' education; others are regarded as more or less obsolete.

The collections are, despite these differences, united by common needs and potentials.

Visions for the future

In my opinion, the collections have their main potential in the fields of teaching, research, science communication and public relations activities for the university. We have to explore these potentials and have to develop innovative models in doing so. I believe that the collections may profit to a high degree from the various reform processes and the new competitive spirit at German universities.

If we want to improve the collections' situation in the long run, we have to build up adequate structures inside and outside our universities. In Erlangen, the next steps could be a still closer and more regular collaboration of the collections, the formulation of a common statute and the foundation of a *Zentralkustodie*, a central office coordinating and supporting the collections' work and needs.

On a nationwide scale, I think it would be very helpful to establish an informal task force for the university collections' direct exchange and discussion of ideas, arguments and solutions.

And - in the very long run - I dream of a university museum as a place to explore the history and to shape the future of the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg.



Fig. 7 – One of the nine central objects: the portrait of a preacher holding his bladder stone.
Photo G. Pöhlein

Literature cited

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